

Method in Theology

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¹AN inaugural lecture might, at first sight, be expected to have something to do with what it inaugurates, but this is obviously a superficial view, for no moderately wise person would speak of what he is only beginning, because he cannot speak from experience and his good intentions are not a safe subject for prophecy.

With the study of theology I can at least claim to have occupied myself from the day when I came out of an institution like this, almost without single answer to any question worth asking. The moment, I began to speak to my fellow-men on religion I realised that I had no more right to speak on it than on other subjects, except as, of my own insight, I knew what I said to be true. This made the study of theology a mere duty of honesty. The result may still be

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¹An Inaugural Lecture

poor enough, but at least it may be helpful to speak of what has seemed to be the best method of trying.

A second reason for choosing this subject is that the most important matter in any seminary of learning is teaching, not organising. The real business of a theological college is being done, if men come out from it knowing how to seek truth for themselves; whereas, without it, the most efficient organisation may only be an elaborate device for wasting youth's precious years. The office I would magnify is still my old calling of a teacher of theology, and did this office make it secondary, it would be very Irish promotion.

82 With us, fortunately, it is merely an office of presiding among teachers, whose distinction in their own subjects alone gives it any dignity it may possess.

Finally, the subject is interesting, central and vital for our day. Nor is it merely for professional theologians, because there is no greater need than that religion should once again speak with convincing force to the minds of men, which it will never do till it is plain that the religious teacher is dealing with a reality which he knows by open-minded inquiry into its true nature according to the method which rightly belongs to it.

As every kind of reality has its own kind of testimony, the first and most important question concerns method. Theology is bankrupt the moment there is any suspicion that it seeks something else than truth, but it does not follow that the method of seeking truth in this department is the same as, let us say, the method of seeking truth in physical science

or philosophy.

Yet it ought to be common to all inquiry that it is seeking truth simply as truth, and that truth is concerned purely with the witness of any kind of reality to itself.

The greatest of all hindrances to religious appeal, at the present time, is the idea that religious people are more concerned about what is correct than about what is true, and that the ecclesiastical leaders, in particular, are more exercised about unanimity than veracity. This may be a prejudice, but it is a prejudice which there has been too little care to avoid creating.

I confess to sharing it a little, and my excuse is that it was stamped on my mind at the most impressionable time of my life. When I went to the university, a raw lad from the ends of the earth, with little equipment except a vast responsiveness to the intellectual environment, the Robertson Smith case was shaking the whole land. I had no notion, in those days, of ever being interested in theology, and my ignorance of the matters in dispute was profound. But I read his speeches, and, on one occasion, heard him. I seemed to find the same kind of knowledge as was making the world a place for me of incessant discovery and the same passion for reality as seemed at the moment life's supreme concern. At the same time I heard people who, not only did not know, but did not want to know, condemning him for vanity, because of his very loyalty to the results of investigation. Again and again I heard people declare that, even if all he said were true, regard for use-

ful tradition and the ecclesiastical amenities should have kept him from saying it. My impression from it all may, very likely, have been hasty, crude, ill-informed, but that does not make it less typical, because the need is just to take heed not to offend one of the little ones whose chief knowledge about theology consists in thinking that no obligation is so sacred as to seek truth with all our hearts and to manifest it with all our powers. Instead, the impression is constantly left, especially on young minds, of

Art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
And simple truth miscalled simplicity.

Occasionally the cause is the manifest ignorance of the judges which entitles them to no opinion at all on the matter under decision; but the far more serious cause is that they do not appear even to desire to know. In my own case my trouble was not in the least that the judges were not critics and philosophers, even though all my interest at the time was in history and thought, but that, as I then understood the business, they were so far from being seekers after truth, that, as we said, they would not have recognised it if they had met it in their porridge, or have laid hold of it if it had bitten their fingers. The
84 impression may have been all wrong, but my point is that ecclesiastical persons, in particular, should give diligent and constant care not to suffer it, by any mistake, to be made on young and inquiring minds, be-

cause it will probably, as in my case, never be obliterated as long as life lasts.

The danger is by no means past. In America a school of psychoanalysts have arisen who regard religion as nothing more than auto-suggestion, made effective by the rhetoric of dogmatic traditionalism. The source of its increasing power is not its own arguments, but the vehement ecclesiastical temper, sustained by the mere confidence of obscurantism. And many utterances, even here, seem at least to say that no person who ever thought for himself has a right to be in any ministry. Quite recently I had a letter which informed me, for my guidance in my new office, that all the degeneracy of the age sprang from ministers not being honest and sincere; and this turned out to be that they did not accept every word in Genesis as an exact account of the origin of the world and that they did not take the whole traditional creed as a soldier the army regulations. Responsible persons do not talk in that unguarded manner, but they often speak of the Catholic Faith in an external way which gives the same impression, and they do not carefully avoid conveying the idea—let us say to hasty minds—that unanimity is more important than reality and counting heads than weight what is in them.

Students feel this most vividly, because it is so opposed to the methods of science, philosophy and historical inquiry, in which they are being trained, which largely accounts for the fewness of the right kind of candidates for the ministry; but it is by

no means confined to them. Everyone who spoke to working men, especially the skilled mechanics, during the war, discovered that they were very little troubled by our divisions, but that they constantly
85 thought that, in spite of our divisions, we were all a kind of trade-union to impose upon mankind merely traditional beliefs, and that the ordinary Christian was largely a Pharisee, concerned mainly with respectabilities and negative moralities. They were mostly outside the Christian Church, but they were honest and sincere and, in their own way, religious, and ought to be inside, which they will never be as long as the Church appeals mainly to minds responsive to assertion.

Of the immediate power of mass impression there can be no dubiety. But does it work in the long run? Can religious truth permanently and deeply affect the mind of an age on a different basis from other truth? All other truth and all unanimity regarding it depend on the object itself convincing the minds that inquire into it by the right method. And in religion also is there any other way of rightly surmounting mere individualism and sectarianism?

For two centuries we have been faced by the affirmation that this inquiry is more obligatory in religion and morals than in any other subject. Many other matters concern us so indirectly that we may be content to accept the best informed opinion about them. But the movement we call Rationalism affirmed that the essence of growing to manhood is to be responsible for our deepest beliefs and to

decide for ourselves our highest duties.

Though personal authority has in all spheres a place in education, in no other sphere is it ever offered us as a final ground for truth, because the moment we suspect that it rests on itself and not on knowledge of the object it ceases to be an authority. This is even truer in religion, because there is no real faith except concerning what we ourselves know. In the New Testament knowledge and faith are identical.

Every now and then movements make a great impression by dogmatic assertion, but the sapping of the foundations goes on all the time, and, over a long period, it is always evident that they have not kept serious and thoughtful minds within the Christian Church, but that, what is still worse, they have been stirring doubt regarding the whole reality of a spiritual world. 86

The most obvious crises have been on historical questions, but the loss of religious power is far more due to a vague idea that somehow science and philosophy have brought into question the existence of all spiritual reality. Nor are we ever likely to recover for religion its true place till it is obvious that we have set ourselves in theology to inquire as openly into the true nature of the spiritual world as in science into the material reality.

The threat, so often repeated in various forms, that, if in religion we are not submissive to ecclesiastical tradition and authority, we shall become infidels, only causes thoughtful men to believe that re-

ligion is merely traditional convention without any basis in reality which will stand investigation. And if God does not manifest Himself now by being an effective power in our experience, if we do not live in Him in some way as continuously and evidently as in the atmosphere, it does not much matter whether we are infidels or not. A God, moreover, credible only on clerical guarantees is a distressing as well as a worthless faith. We have always to be sustaining it, whereas a faith in what we know, on its own recognisances, to be true sustains us.

Wherefore, if theology is ever again to be a convincing pursuit, it must accept four principles which belong to all search for truth, to all inquiry into the nature of any kind of reality.

1. Religion, like all else that claims to deal with a real world, must submit to open investigation.

87 2. In this investigation truth is accord with what actually exists; and the only ground for being assured of this correspondence is right interpretation of the witness of this reality by the difference it makes in our experience.

3. Man is not made in the image of God unless, in so far as he follows the mind of God in seeking to know the thoughts of God, he is the measure of the universe. That is to say the only way to have a universally valid truth is by free and independent inquiry into it.

4. Humility must be reinterpreted, not as submission to human authority, but as total disregard to man, when, by His own manifestation, God speaks

to us. The sort of humility which accepts people, to whom no particular deference would have been paid had they lived in the twentieth century, as authorities because they lived in the fourth, is not, as is claimed, submission to an objective authority, but turns us from the authority of the object of faith itself, which alone is objective.

In these points theology agrees with all search for truth whatsoever; and by no other way than by thus seeing together the same spiritual world are we ever likely to come to any worthy accord in belief or any useful harmony in action. None of the devices for imposing beliefs has ever helped us a step toward either.

But here the agreement with Rationalism ends. Religion does not consist in mere intellectual propositions, such as that God exists and rules the world, or that man is immortal, as Rationalism assumed. Therefore, intellectual argument, which Rationalism regarded as the only method of intellectual honesty, is not the method of theology. Rationalism, by its method, made religion depend on theology, whereas theology, like all other real investigation, must depend on the nature of the object of its inquiry, which, in this case, is religion. To make religion depend on theology is like making art depend on intellectually demonstrating rules of criticism or morals on inferences from utility.

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Religion is not greatly interested in whether it can be proved or not that God made the world, if that is all; or that He rules it, if it is only the smooth run-

ning of a mechanism. No higher religion has ever said that an overruling providence can be inferred from the fortunate happenings in the world, or, in any way, identified the belief in it with optimism.

Even a future life, as a demonstration from the utility of the soul, or information by intercourse with the departed, or inference from the need of an adjustment of moral rewards, does not concern religion, but may be an appeal to self-interest, detrimental to the true interests both of religion and morality.

The supreme interest of religion is God, but it is because the world is one thing with God, and another without. Belief in providence is the nerve and sinew of all religious faith, yet only because it depends on the world as it is, but on reconciliation to a purpose above it and beyond it. No realisation of this is possible within the limits of our earthly life, but its hope rests on finding in the eternal purpose with the world the power of an endless life, and not on any demonstration about the future.

Rationalism landed in as abstract and barren conclusions about the material world as about the spiritual. Instead of accepting the witness of this world to itself and seeking to understand it, it tried to demonstrate by argument a more real reality behind it. The result was first a mere dead abstraction called matter; then a kind of Divine speech, regular, but with no continuous reality; then a mere succession of impressions, with no link save custom.

Meantime, the poet, opening his heart to what the world said to him, and the religious man to what

it required of him, were finding their intercourse with it a revelation of deeper meaning, wider reach, and surer reality. Instead of seeking some abstraction, uniform to all men at all times, they reached out to endless possibilities by their highest intuitions and aspirations, and then, feeling the need of a still larger experience, turned to history, and found in it what Rationalism, by its method of demonstration from what merely exists, was denying, not only a wider, but a prophetic revelation. 89

Unless God is continuously and progressively revealing Himself in His dealings with His world, He is not God in any sense which concerns religion; therefore history, as man's larger experience, must be of supreme importance for interpreting any purpose there may be in the world. Yet, if we are still only reaching out to that purpose, it must be history as prophecy and not merely as facts.

Religion does not take an optimistic view of the history of the world, on its face value, any more than of the world itself at any given moment. The supreme quality of faith is the power, as Luther said, to go against appearances. It does so by a vision of something above them and beyond them; and it is with this something that theology is supremely concerned.

Theology, like science, must be determined by the nature of the reality it studies, and no theory can ever rise to the point at which it can determine facts. Of no reality can we ever say more than that it exists, and the only manifestation is the difference it makes

in our experience. The particular difference here is reconciliation to what otherwise is a hostile world, and victory over its evil, and the making of all of it ours for abiding good. All the concreteness, life, interest, appeal of religion ceases when we turn from this victorious faith to dialectic. Then we naturally land in the abstraction of an absolute cosmic process, just as Rationalism landed in matter and mechanism.

90 As each kind of reality has its own witness, each kind of inquiry has its own method. Thus the method of theology is at once distinguished from the method of physical science by the fact that it looks forward, while science looks backward. Theology reaches out beyond the world's largest meaning, while science concerns itself with origins and uniformities. As science aims at manipulating experience and not at passing beyond it, it seeks these uniformities, not in the meaning of our experience, but in what we may call the fixed symbolism which lies beneath it. This last point would require fuller elucidation than can here be given it, but it is something like the reduction of speech to writing by discovering that syllables are fewer than words and vocables than syllables. Even if everything could be reduced, as in the Einstein theory, to the point event and its four relations, it would only be like reducing writing to the dot and dash of the Morse system. The process of writing would thus be reduced to its simplest elements, but the reality would still be this immensely varied world, just as the end of writing is to express the immense complexity of

thought. As thought is the reality of writing, all the possibilities of experience are the real world. The notion that science gives the true picture of complete reality was the mere illusion of a dominant interest, which is no longer entertained by serious thinkers. Scientists are, as it were, merely the writing masters of experience, fulfilling a very important task for the managing of the world, but with no right to set for us the limits of its possibilities. The whole attitude of truth knows no limits. That, if we would conceive it largely enough, sets the task of theology by the task of life; and science itself, even while it looks back to origins, shows that the progress of every living creature depends on reaching out to the dimly conceived possibilities of wider environment. Did this disappear from man as his supreme endowment and inspiration, science itself would be as useless as writing without eloquence and poetry.

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Philosophy deals with the whole of experience as thought and meaning and value, and seeks to infer from it its complete meaning. From this it is easy to pass to the idea that religion is just popular philosophy. But religion is not greatly concerned with interpreting experience as it is. It does not think it can be so interpreted. We must go as far as we can in understanding the world, because the better we interpret things as they are, the better we may see the higher world to be realised through them. Yet philosophy is only, as it were, the grammar of experience. Religion alone reaches out to what eye hath not seen and ear not heard, as it were to life's poetry and prophecy.

Religion believes that the world, except as the possibility of this, is without meaning. We cannot find God as part of the world, but it is God above and beyond the world that can alone give meaning to all of it. Even if we had an omniscience metaphysic of experience, philosophy would still not be religion, because religion would still be asking what God means to make of it all.

Theology, as the study of religion ought, therefore, to be of the nature of prophecy. As its interest is the goal, it necessarily works on the frontiers of intuition and anticipation; and it asks what relation to the present reality best manifests what is beyond it. Its prime conviction is that a higher reality is seeking to reveal itself to us through our whole experience in this present world, and is calling us to participate in its life, and that, as with all fuller life, we enter in as we reach out after our farthest vision and are loyal to its highest even vaguely concerned requirements.

Wherefore, the business of theology is to deal with life and actual experience, but with them as they speak to us of things beyond demonstration, things of moments of deeper insight and higher consecration. Its justification is that thereby it is dealing with life's supreme business of progress.

Here, too, is its justification for concerning itself so much with history. The reason is not that it may live in the past, but that the past is the chief means for reaching out to the future. Yet, unlike science, it is not the uniformities of the past that interest it, but the new, the exceptional, the experience above our

own. Thus it is with the past as prophecy, not as antiquarianism, the past as an enlargement of our experience, not as a substitute for it. Especially it draws its material, its inspiration, its guidance, from those who in the stress of greater conflict have been more faithful to the highest, and so have seen farthest. It is not a mere question of learning what they saw, as we can all be in some measure poets of nature when we read Wordsworth. The supreme thing is to learn the bearing towards life whereby men were prophets of the highest. And when we find one whose bearing was wholly right, in utter emancipation of soul from the blindness of worldly prudence and the fetters of evil desire, who with the absolute courage of faith walked ever into the unseen and eternal, theology thinks it has found its right beginning, the attitude in which it can hope to have good success, the freedom and the emancipation whereby it can interpret to man the higher realm of his possibility, which is essentially a world of freedom in larger truth and more far-reaching aspiration.

Whether any method that can be applied in this sphere can be called scientific or not is a mere matter of definition. If to be scientific mean that it must follow the method of physical science, it is not scientific. If science means all inquiry into any sphere of reality by its own method, with no pre-possession, except a sense of its importance and with an assurance that only by knowing it as it actually is shall we ever be able to live in it with profit, then theology is, or ought to be, scientific. Physical science

looks backward and theology forward, and therefore their methods cannot be the same, but humanity will have left the main stream of progress, when its dominant interest in knowledge and enterprise ceases to be reaching forward to things that are before. Even the attitude of physical science is only a way of forgetting the things that are behind without losing their lesson for the things that are before. But it leaves out everything except the uniformities which we may hope to meet again, whereas a true theology leaves out nothing of the concrete varied world that is within the grasp of our finite minds, in the hope of seeing the things unseen manifested in the things which do appear.

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